

The Russian and Chinese Revolutions

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One of our objectives in this Journal is to examine Communist China in the light of the Soviet experience. With this in mind, we have asked Prof. Seton-Watson to set down his thoughts on the Russian and Chinese revolutions as a postscript to our survey of Communist China's first decade.

THE comparison of the revolutionary movements, the seizure of power by the Communists, and the establishment and evolution of totalitarian régimes in Russia and China is a vast field of study in which little work has yet been achieved. The obvious obstacle is of course the scarcity of scholars in the non-Communist world who are familiar with the language, culture and history of both Russia and China. A truly formidable intellectual equipment is required. Dr. Karl Wittfogel and Dr. Benjamin Schwarz are outstanding among the few who possess it. One hopes that among the rising generations of the western nations the necessary combination of knowledge will become more frequent. Meanwhile those of us who have specialised in the Russian or East European field must learn what we can of China from secondary works and from those original documents which are available in translation. Well aware of the inadequacy of our understanding of Chinese affairs, we can only put to our Sinological colleagues problems which have arisen in the history of the Soviet or European Communist movements or régimes, and ask their opinions on the relevance of these problems, or on the reasons why they are not relevant, to China. It is in this spirit that the following observations are offered, as a contribution not to knowledge but to discussion. The points which I wish to raise are mainly concerned with the relationship of the Communist movement to social classes during its rise to power.

In both countries the revolutionary movement started from the intelligentsia. It was the small secular intellectual élite, subjected to modern European influences, which first accepted modern revolutionary ideas and sought to put them into practice. Not only were the first revolutionary leaders intellectuals, but the first stage of revolutionary activity consisted of intellectual discussion groups. This stage in Russian history is known as *Kruzhkovshchina* (from *Kruzhok*, "a little circle"). However, the stage at which specifically Marxist ideas became dominant in

the revolutionary movement, and the stage at which revolution took place, were not the same in the two countries.

In Russia, *Kruzhkovshchina* developed into active conspiracy, and the conspirators attracted considerable mass support in several industrial centres, before Marxism became the main revolutionary doctrine. The People's Will of 1879-81 was an efficient revolutionary organisation, even if small in numbers. By the turn of the century the Marxists were gaining ground at the expense of the Populists. In 1905 Marxist revolutionaries, Menshevik and Bolshevik, the differences between whom were less clear within Russia than in the political articles of newspapers in exile, were able to lead large numbers of workers in strikes, demonstrations and even armed insurrection. After 1905 the relative importance of the intelligentsia in the revolutionary movement declined, while that of the working class increased. In the years 1906-17 the intelligentsia were losing their obsession with revolution, and becoming more interested in culture. However, the professional revolutionary, the type foreshadowed in Lenin's *What is to be done?* of 1900, was still an important element in the movement, and the chaotic conditions produced by military defeat and administrative collapse in 1917 reinforced his importance. The professional revolutionary was still recruited primarily from the intelligentsia, though the intellectual climate was less favourable to him and though recruits from the working class were beginning to be numerous too. In both the "February" and the "October" Revolutions, however, the working class of Petrograd played a decisive role. It was manipulated by Lenin, but without its mass support he could not have won. In the civil war which followed, the administrators and commissars and many of the military commanders on the Bolshevik side came from the skilled workers, and the support of the workers in those sections of industry and transport which still functioned behind the fronts was an important factor in the Bolshevik victory.

In China, Marxism does not seem to have been an important influence in the revolutionary intelligentsia until 1918, but then it seems to have made rapid progress. As in Russia, in China too the Marxists quickly won support among the workers, and the Chinese industrial proletariat was an important factor in the Communist movement of the early 1920s. But the Shanghai commune of 1927 proved a more tragic version of Russia's 1905, and there was no 1917 in any great Chinese city. During the 1930s Communist power was built up in remote provinces where the old state machine of the Manchu period had ceased to exist and where the new state machine of the post-1927 Kuomintang never established itself. In these areas the leading role was played by professional revolutionaries, of whom surely most came from the intelligentsia, even if there were some of worker origin from the 1920s, and others were recruited and

trained from the peasant masses. In the 1940s when the patriotic struggle against Japan took first place, the Communists won support both in Japanese-occupied territory and in the regions effectively ruled by the Kuomintang. In both areas it was among the intelligentsia that they were most successful, especially among the intellectual youth. Here the best parallel for China is to be found not in Russia but in Yugoslavia. The double appeal of heroic and successful patriotic guerrilla warfare and of a vaguely phrased programme of social regeneration was equally attractive to the educated youth of Japanese-ruled Peking and German-ruled Belgrade. This difference in the circumstances of the Russian and Chinese revolutionary movement and the fact that China was less industrialised than the Russia of 1917, may account for the continued importance of the intelligentsia in support of Communism in China in comparison with Russia. One may, however, wonder whether the traditional respect of Chinese society for intellectuals, arising from the Confucian tradition, was also an important factor in the difference between the development of the two Communist movements.

The relationship of the Communists to the peasants also suggests parallels with Yugoslavia. The Communists' armed struggle for power in China was much longer than in Russia or Yugoslavia. The first stage ended in disaster in 1927. In the second stage, which was decisive for the creation of the Communists' military and civil state machine, and which lasted from 1927 to 1945, conditions were basically very similar to those in Yugoslavia between 1941 and 1944. The revolutionary struggle was fought not at the urban centre (as in Petrograd in 1917) but at the rural periphery. Here the available manpower was peasant, and until they had found methods and policies which would recruit peasants the Chinese Communists were unsuccessful. The interpretation of Mao's 1927 *Report on the Peasant Movement in Hunan*, as made available in the *Documentary History of Chinese Communism* edited by Fairbank, Schwarz and Brandt, is a matter of controversy on which the present writer cannot have an expert opinion. Some of the phrases used by Mao about the peasantry appear more candid than could be expected of any orthodox Comintern spokesman of that time. But of course the idea that peasants should be mobilised, for its own purposes, by the Communist Party, and that they should be promised—and even granted—such economic advantages as would attract them to the party's cause, was in no sense an original discovery by Mao. Lenin had always been extremely realistic on this problem, and one may well feel that if Lenin had been placed in Mao's position in the 1930s, he would have acted as Mao did, and that if he had been in Tito's place in 1943 he would have pursued Tito's policies. Essentially all three Communist revolutions used the peasants for their purposes with success. Lenin promised the

peasant soldiers peace in 1917; legalised the peasants' seizure of landlords' property in 1918; and induced peasants, partly by propaganda and partly by force, to fight in his Red Army in 1919 and 1920. His economic concessions to them in 1921 went further still. But at no time was there any question of the peasants having, or even sharing, *political power*. The Communist Party, with its classless cadres of professional revolutionaries, recruited from men who may have begun their active life as peasants or workers or middle-class intelligentsia but were now above and beyond the class from which they sprang, held a monopoly of political power. Tito fought his struggle in different conditions, beginning with small-scale guerrilla warfare in the mountains and extending it to a country-wide "liberation struggle" which was both a national and a civil war. He created armies from peasants, attracted by patriotic zeal and the hope of social justice, but it was his professional revolutionaries, cadres no less classless than their Bolshevik prototypes, which led and controlled the movement. In China, surely, the same was true. Mao's classless cadres ruled the Yenan republic and the various anti-Japanese liberated areas, and after 1945 officered the larger armies of the civil war. The peasants served in their armies, but they never determined their policies.

Since 1949 the Chinese régime has moved more rapidly towards full totalitarianism than did the Russian. This may be partly because the Soviet model was there for the Chinese to study, to copy or to improve on as desired, whereas the Russians were pioneers. The shortness of the Chinese NEP is of course also largely due to the outbreak of the Korean War, and the consequent spy-mania and xenophobic hysteria. The phenomenon of "brain-washing" appears to have "peculiarly Chinese" features. Both Russians and Chinese have massacred their opponents (if anything, it seems to me that the Chinese have been more, rather than less, cruel than the Russians). But whereas the Bolsheviks were on the whole content, until the Yezhov Purge of 1937-39, to employ non-party "specialists" in subordinate positions, relying on a combination of incentives and terror to ensure their loyalty, the Chinese Communists appear to feel the necessity to "convert" them by the elaborate procedure of brain-washing. Is this explicable in terms of the Chinese past? Is the authority of the Chinese Communist leaders explicable in terms of the traditional prestige of the scholar-bureaucrat? How much of the psychology of the Communist élite can be explained by the formality of education in an ideographic language? Will the introduction of an alphabet have even more revolutionary effects on Chinese society than land reform or the collectivisation of agriculture? These are only a few of the questions which the inexpert but serious student would like to put to his Sinological colleagues.